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## **Towards Household History: A Reply to Dehue**

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## Towards Household History: A Reply to Dehue

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**J.F. Hans van Rappard**

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**ABSTRACT.** It is maintained that in contradistinction to the natural sciences, in psychology (and other human sciences) 'history is not past tense'. This is borne out by the contemporary relevance of a specific part of the history of psychology, which focuses on the internal-theoretical significance of history for the conceptual 'household' of the discipline. From this perspective, several issues in the Danziger–Van Rappard–Dehue debate are addressed.

**KEY WORDS:** historiography, psychology, relevance

When, now already some years ago, Danziger (1994) published a paper on the future of the history of psychology, I felt compelled to draft a commentary (Van Rappard, 1997), which in its turn led Danziger (1997a) to reply. And now this historiographical exchange, rare in our field, has yielded yet another comment addressed to both of us (Dehue, 1998).

Let me briefly return to Danziger's (1994) argument by way of warming up. The reason why Danziger decided to write on the future of the history of psychology is that increasingly not only psychologists but also professional historians appear to be active in the field, just as has happened in other disciplines, notably the natural sciences. This prompted the question about the relation between the scientist-scholar and the professional historian. In the first part of his paper, Danziger, drawing on professional historian of science Paul Forman (1991), painted a picture of the insider/scientist-scholar that in my view was so drab that it called for coloration. In the second part, Danziger argued that in keeping with the cracks in the traditional self-understanding of the science, a new historiographical approach called Critical History had entered the scene, which he expected would bridge the insider/psychologist–outsider/historian cleavage.

Before further steps can be made, Dehue's (1998, pp. 659–660, n. 1) distinction should be mentioned between the institutional and methodological aspects of this issue. Dehue ascribes to Danziger the view that both are inextricably linked. That is also my opinion, but that does not preclude that the two aspects may have different emphases. Danziger, I think, places most weight on the institutional side, whereas I lean towards methodology. However, the two aspects cannot readily be separated. If rigour is singled out, relevance cannot but suffer, and vice versa (cf. Dehue). Biologist-historian Ernst Mayr (1990) has observed that '[m]ost . . . scientists have had considerable interest in the history of science. . . . The interest of the scientist,

however, is quite specific and in many respects different from that of the historian trained in the humanities' (p. 304). If Mayr is correct, the professional outsiders are likely to remain outsiders indeed. It is my contention that because of his or her professional training, the outsider historian will not feel inclined to produce relevant history in the sense of history of current issues that are communicated in terms that are apposite to the scientific community concerned.

This brings us to the term 'community history', introduced by Dehue to describe relevant history. I would like to propose another term, which to me seems closer to what is meant by insider/community history and why it is important: *household history*.

I do not want to burden this reply with many references but mentioning books and papers such as *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* (Gergen, 1982), 'Consciousness according to James' (Shapiro, 1997) or *Against Cognitivism: Alternative Foundations for Cognitive Psychology* (Still & Costall, 1991) should suffice to give the reader an inkling of the place of insider history in psychology. It is clear that from the historian's point of view the role played by, say, Wundt, James and Vygotsky in such studies must be called 'limited'. The professional historian is fully entitled to this judgement—the field of history is wider than would appear from the works mentioned. However, isn't it characteristic of fields such as psychology that these kinds of studies are produced at all? They may also be found in sociology, economics and other human sciences, but as far as I can see psychology stands out quantitatively. In the natural sciences, however, such studies are not to be found. Hence, I find it difficult to appreciate Danziger's (1994) view that the history of psychology shows such a strong bent for celebration—what I perceive seems more like lamentation . . .

The focus of my 'fierce opposition' (Dehue) to Danziger is to be found in his observation that

Weber and Durkheim are still studied by sociologists, just as Adam Smith and Ricardo are still studied by economists, whereas Galilean and Newtonian studies are not part of physics but belong to an altogether different discipline, the (outsider/professional) history of science. (Danziger, 1994, p. 472)

This quotation conveniently summarizes what I argue in my comment on Danziger and in much of this reply to Dehue: in the human sciences (part of) history has a place *within* the discipline concerned, in contradistinction to the natural sciences. I wondered, therefore, why mention Weber and Ricardo but not Wundt, James, Vygotsky and many others in psychology? After all, it is psychologists such as these who frequently feature in the kind of foundational studies referred to. In such works, Wundt, James or Vygotsky are primarily studied not because of their historical interest but because of their paradigmatic views on the pursuit of psychology, that is, they are studied from a theoretical perspective. From this angle, history might also be called historically informed theoretical psychology (Van Rappard, 1988). Time and again, contemporary psychologists return to the theoretical veins that are there to be mined from the works of the great dead psychologists in their quest for fresh perspectives and more adequate designs of the discipline. It is, I contend, in this context that the contemporary relevance of history and its particular role within psychology is to be understood. And it is this 'internal' role that in my opinion answers the question why history is still taught in psychology but not in the natural

sciences (Van Rappard, 1993). The answer is that in marked distinction to the natural sciences, foundational discussions are still stirred up *within* psychology, *by* psychologists, and *for the sake of* psychology.

In Dehue's comment, much is made of her interpretation that my historiography entails first and foremost 'showing [historical] continuity [and] tracing the longer lines' (p. 655). True enough, on various occasions, including the papers used by Dehue to reconstruct my position, I have written on main currents and traditions in the history of psychology. However, what these concepts referred to was emphatically not a linearity, let alone a finalistic development of the discipline. And I most certainly do not maintain the simplistic kind of presentism that Dehue saddles me with. By main current or tradition I do not mean an inevitable development from the darkest pre-psychological ages down to the glorious cognitive present or something like that. Let me quote Dehue when she describes my position as the view that

... the best way of producing histories of interest to present-day psychologists is by demonstrating that the field's central issues often stem from long traditions and that there are 'persistent clusters of foundational ideas'. In this way, history can be part of theoretical psychology and thus be relevant to psychologists in their day-to-day concerns. (p. 655)

Several points emerge from this quotation. First, the traditions consist of *persistent* clusters, and this emphasis throws a different light on 'tradition' than mere 'long line'. The traditions derive their longevity *not* from their temporally long development towards the psychological present, but from their persistence. And second, this persistence in its turn is inextricably linked to the foundational nature of the traditions. Although traditions are not perennial, at this 'deep' layer of psychological thinking change takes place only slowly—much slower than its societal context. But this does not mean, as Dehue (p. 656) writes, that my position entails that would-be historians are *commissioned* to find stable traditions and hence are required to 'close their eyes to variabilities and discontinuities'. This borders on caricature. In virtue of their being persistent clusters of foundational ideas, historical traditions function rather as broad river-beds within which variability and change take place.

Referring to the last lines of the quotation, it should be pointed out that my stress on theoretical psychology is prompted by the great weight placed in my argument on the contemporary relevance of (part of) the history of psychology. Where, I wonder, might this relevance be found if not on the foundational-conceptual plane? Now, saying this in no way precludes that alternative historiographies might also be relevant to the discipline. The question as to what is relevant to psychology is of course intimately related to one's view of the field, and our science shows an almost bewildering variance in this respect. However, what I want to draw attention to is a historiography that is characteristic of psychology and other human sciences in that it is specifically aimed at foundational issues and more often than not driven by lamentation rather than celebration. Psychological household historians are typically *not* pleased with the state of the discipline. In this respect, history and theory prove closely linked. Precisely because of the foundational nature of this kind of historical inquiry a historically informed theoretical psychology will be difficult to clearly distinguish from philosophy. Indeed, my picture of the history of psychology and its place in the field has a philosophical colour and the lines between the history, theory and philosophy of the discipline tend to be blurred.

It bears repeating that household history covers no more than a self-consciously limited part of the province of history. But it is precisely because of its limitation that it may concern itself directly with the 'basics' of the psychological household. Stimulation, motivation, cognition and other Danzigerian (1997b) 'categories' are examples of such basics, even if relatively short-lived ones. The category of activity, to mention another example, has persisted in the so-called 'Leibnizian' tradition on the European continent for at least two hundred years (Van Rappard, 1987).

Household history seems characteristic of those who are on the inside of the field. I would not like to see this work become eclipsed by the increasing professionalization of the history of psychology, but, I contend, this constitutes a real danger. This emerges from Dehue's treatment of what may be called the hall-mark of the professional historian's history: contextualism. It should be noted first that her view on the topic is remarkably variegated: Dehue is seen to oppose contextualism to presentism (1), which, however, is also defended (2), albeit only reluctantly (3). Matters are complicated further when it is found in note 5 that contextualism is used in a particular way, which, however unclear it remains what exactly Dehue means by the term, clearly does not involve 'context' in the obvious sense of 'factors that influence science'. Dehue's context has a different meaning because she sees 'no point in drawing fixed boundaries between social, cognitive, internal or external factors' (p. 660, n. 5). I appreciate that context is a dynamic concept, which cannot be defined beforehand, but I am left without a clue as to what her use of it could possibly involve. Smith (1997) has recently shed light on the topic. Contextualism, he observes, requires that the historian of science stand in a position '*independent of any claim to truth status found in the historical subject-matter*' (p. 33; emphasis added). This led historians to borrow the symmetry principle of the strong programme of the sociology of knowledge, which is also subscribed to by Dehue. Symmetry, Smith continues, made historians adopt the conceptualization of their subject-matter as discourse, which focused their interest on 'the language, practice and power which claim to establish truth' (p. 33). Now, this may be alright as an outsider perspective for the full-blooded historian, but the insider, I contend, would rather see that the conceptualization of the issues fits in with the discipline and is not brought in from a different field.

To summarize: the historiography behind the comment on Danziger (1994), which is presently defended against Dehue (1998), may succinctly be stated as 'psychology's history is not past tense'. Danziger and Dehue will probably agree. But I expect them to disagree when it is added that in this respect a crucial difference may be found within the natural sciences, where history has no contemporary relevance. This means not that these disciplines are not historical but that history plays no internal role; it does not form part of their (conceptual) household utensils, so to speak.

The present perspective is self-consciously limited. It is limited *qua* domain since it focuses on foundational issues—most certainly not on finalistic traditions, even if such issues tend to be persistent and in that sense may often be called traditional. In other words, I am concerned with the specific internal-theoretical role of history in disciplines such as psychology, economics and, most conspicuously of all, philosophy. Moreover, since this role is in danger of being obscured by the professionalization, that is, the *non-psychological* sophistication of the historian, my perspective is also limited from the historiographical point of view. But I admit that

at this point my position may be vulnerable: Danziger's view that the future of the history of psychology is not identical to its past cannot be lightly dismissed. And however unclear Dehue's view on contextualism may be, if what she means is that there is more to history than a straightforward history of ideas, I might have a hard time contradicting her. Hence, as long as I do not have to cross over to another field, I am prepared to consider if 'limited history' might not be too limited. I should add that I would be encouraged in this endeavour by an insider/outsider methodological specification of critical history and contextualism.

Quite encouraging, however, is the view emerging from this exchange that Danziger and Dehue, no less than I, basically wish to pursue household history.

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